Commonplace Book Primer

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To those, who have been accustomed to the use of a Commonplace Book, the advantage of a convenient Repository of the kind is well known; and to those, who have not, its utility must be sufficiently obvious. The man who reads, and neglects to note down the essence of what he has read; the man who sees, and omits to record what he has seen; the man who thinks, and fails to treasure up his thoughts in some place…will often have occasion to regret an omission, which such a book, as is now offered to him, is well calculated to remedy.[1]

[1] From: A New Commonplace Book…Properly Ruled Throughout with a Complete Skeleton Index, and Ample Directions for its Use; Equally Adapted to the Man of Letters and the Man of Observation, the Traveller & the Student, and Forming a Useful and Agreeable Companion, on the Road and in the Closet (London, 1799), p.1.

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Preface:
Why Keep a Commonplace Book?

> *Make your own Bible. Select and Collect all those words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of trumpet out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, John and Paul.*
>
> Emerson *Journals* July 1836

This book is an introduction to the practice keeping a reading notebook, sometimes referred to as a commonplace book. Most of the readers I know or observe do not keep a record of the memorable passages they come upon in the books they read. I believe there is much to be gained by doing so.

There is nothing complicated about this. One need only think of it as a notebook where you record some of the ideas, questions, poems, or expressions that strike you as notable in some way.

The commonplace book concept originated in Greek and Roman antiquity for students and scholars to keep a record of the knowledge and moral wisdom of the day. It was intended as a source to draw upon in writing, speeches, education, and legal argument. That was pretty much their purpose until the development of printed encyclopedias after which the practice gradually became less common and the few that were kept

became a personal record of notable passages from an individual's reading history.

This remains its primary purpose today. I am often asked, "Why keep a commonplace book? After all, reading is such a great pleasure, why interrupt it by turning away from the page to spend the time recording a pithy passage?" It is not hard for me to answer.

First, I believe that keeping a commonplace book gives rise to a deeper form of reading. If you stop to think further about something you have read, then underline it, and eventually add it to your commonplace book, you will inevitably read more carefully, more reflectively, and no doubt more slowly than you normally do.

Secondly, memories are fleeting and what we read is quickly forgotten. However, if we have added the quotations, poems, and fragments we wish to save to our commonplace book, they can be preserved and readily reviewed or drawn upon whenever we wish.

Finally, I have also come to believe there is genuine personal value served by keeping a commonplace book. Not only is it a fund of knowledge and source of new ideas, it can also lead to personal insight and understanding. This has been true for me each time I go back to review the entries I have made, as well as in the informal studies I have

carried out on the nature of the passages I've recorded.

Overview

Several years ago, when I began investigating commonplace books, I was hoping only to look more analytically at my own. I thought of it as an exercise, a novel approach to better understanding myself. I soon realized, however, that I was far from alone in keeping a notebook of important quotations.

This brought me in contact with the tradition of commonplace books stretching back to antiquity, as well as the works of other authors who have either published their commonplace book or carried out historical research on the topic. When I first started to think about the practice, I didn't have any idea why these individuals spent so much time at this task or how they intended to use the material once they had so diligently transcribed it.

In the introductory chapter I briefly review the method I use in collecting passages and provide the historical background of commonplace books. The literature of those philosophers, scholars, and theologians who copied their favorite quotations, poems, or sections of the manuscripts they read is not well known.[2] Chapter Two provides examples

[2] Since I had never intended to publish the material in my commonplace book, I neglected to record the author and source of each selection. It is too late now to try to remedy this situation with specific citations for the

of some of the most widely read commonplace books.

I also decided to try to find out more about the commonplace book tradition by surveying other individuals who kept one. The results, some of which surprised me, are discussed in Chapter Three.

The recent appearance of commonplace books on the web was a totally unexpected outcome of my inquiry and Chapter Four presents an overview of this development, one that may foreshadow the future direction it will take. In Chapter Five and Six, I describe the results of two informal studies of my own commonplace book

The volume concludes in Chapter Seven with a discussion of the benefits a commonplace book can have for any reader and its future in a world where electronic readers are becoming increasingly popular.

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hundreds of passages I have recorded. More importantly, where the passage appears matters far less to me than the idea it conveys or the way it is written. I apologize to those readers who might wish to know the exact source of a certain passage(s) I refer to in this volume. However, I believe it should be possible to obtain this information for the majority of quotes when at least the author and book title are noted and for well-known authors.

1
Marks in the Margin

Whenever in my reading, occurs concerning this our fellow creature, I do never fail to set it down by way of commonplace.

Jonathan Swift

Time was when readers kept commonplace books. Whenever they came across a pithy passage, they copied it into a notebook under an appropriate heading…Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things.

Robert Darnton

About twenty years ago I started to keep a record of some of the thoughts and ideas in the books that I had been reading. By then I had already turned fifty and while I had always been a reader, I don't know why I hadn't started before. I may have copied a few passages over the years, but I wrote slowly, often illegibly, and none of those written pages remain. What I do have, however, are over 600 pages of various extracts copied from the books and periodicals that I have read and then collected in what has become two rather huge spiral bound notebooks. Following a long established tradition it is known as my commonplace book.

When I come across something notable that I have read, I put a little mark by it in the margin or enclose the relevant passage in parentheses. I invariably stop to think about it for a moment before adding the page number on which it appears to a list I keep on the inside back cover of the book or last page of whatever periodical I am reading. Once I've finished the material, I copy each of the passages that I've marked in a document on my computer.

I know some people feel differently about this, that the meaning of a passage can only be fully grasped by copying them by hand. But because I write so poorly the computer has made it possible for me to record these passages in a readable form with ease. I can't imagine having a volume of such length, or of any length for that matter, were it not for my laptop, or that I would continue the practice so avidly without giving it a second thought.

Some of the books I read have a great many marked passages, others very few. I used to judge the quality of a book by the number of passages that I marked. Eventually I realized that was a mistake, since occasionally I come across a really worthwhile book in which I don't mark any passages. At the end of each year, I make a copy of the collected passages and add them to my ever-growing commonplace book.

Recently a friend wrote to me that she also keeps such a book, one that is not so much a record of her

reading but rather of certain ideas that come up in the enormous number of books she reads. She believed the passages fell into some kind of pattern that she was trying to understand. My hunch is that she will spend a lifetime at this thankless task. She also said she would kill herself if she lost it. Well, it must be quite a treasure.

In the beginning my commonplace book was largely composed of quotations that struck me as worth recording for one reason or another. The first entry is from Samuel Coleridge: *Advice is like snow; the softer it falls…the deeper it sinks into the mind.* The idea has considerable appeal to me now, although I'm not sure why it did at the time I made note of it. Soon after there is one from William James: *Wisdom is learning what to overlook*. Again the notion has grown in meaning over the years.

Eventually the entries became longer. *When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount for me to nearly the same thing.* —William Carlos Williams. *At the breakfast table I always open the newspaper to the sports page first. The sports page records people's accomplishments. The front page has nothing but men's failures.* —George Plimpton.

Then I began to split apart the quotations from a miscellaneous collection of phrases and short extracts that I called Briefs. These could be

anything from an amusing phrase or word, a short passage from the *New York Times*, a periodical, or something I read on the web: *Eat! You need strength to worry.* — Jewish Fortune Cookie message. *The whole world seemed to have changed into a Robert Altman movie. Jarring and sour and crazy and colored in a palette that I believe drove my entire generation mildly insane.* —Michael Chabon.

Soon I begin to separate the Quotes and Briefs from the Passages that comprised the longer sections I began to copy from the books and periodicals that I was reading. For example, I copied several memorable passages from Ian McEwan's *Atonement*:

> *...the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong.*
>
> *...nothing was ever as one imagined it.*
>
> *...truth was strange and deceptive, it had to be struggled for, against the flow of the everyday.*
>
> *The age of clear answers was over.*

Whatever humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college law, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable.

Each year my commonplace book consists of entries in each of these groups with the Passages by far the largest of the three sections. In 2004 I added thirty-seven pages of Passages and four pages of Briefs and since I entered only a few new quotations I did not print a new Quotes section that year.

By way of comparison, in 1996, the first year that I began to distinguish the three types of entries, there were eleven pages of Passages, four of Briefs, and two of Quotes. This difference can be attributed to the fact I now have far more time for reading than I did in the nineties when I was still actively engaged in teaching and research. Beginning in 2002 the number of Passages increased almost twofold compared to previous years. I have no idea why this occurred. There was also a further doubling during the next four years so that in 2005 I recorded fifty-five pages of Passages. I think these changes are due largely to the improving quality of the books I am reading now. After all, one can only read so many romance novels.

Reading serious literature takes time. To make the most of it a reader should be able to linger over the

text for a while, pause to give it some thought, stop to mark a memorable passage, and perhaps revisit it before moving on. Ideally a reader should be free of the distractions of pressing work deadlines, household chores, or other responsibilities and be able to disengage from the onslaught of the media, telephone, and the Internet. These are the conditions of my life now. It is also true that I've taken a liking to the practice of commonplacing; it has become a habit as well as a commitment to maintain a record of the noteworthy ideas that I have found on the pages of the literary works that I've been fortunate enough to be able to read.

In a recent interview at Salon.com[3] James Salter asserted: "Sentences should not cause you to stop and admire them. They should be in the service of the page." That brought me to a halt and I proceeded to do the very thing Salter said I shouldn't. After pondering his claim for a bit, I began to wonder if I should give up the practice required to maintain my commonplace book. Am I missing the sheer power of the page by stopping to admire a sentence or make note of one from time to time? Have I lost sight of why I began copying extracts in the first place and the inherent benefits of the practice? These questions more or less answered themselves, for in stopping to consider Salter's claim I was thoroughly in the "service of the page." It was not the sentence *per se* that

[3] http://www.salon.com/books/int/2005/06/17/salter.html

caused me to stop. Rather, I stopped because of the effect the sentence had on me and the way it led me to want to make special note of its meaning and consider, for a moment, the several questions it raised.

Recently I've begun to wonder what it would it be like if I stopped my commonplacing activity. Could I do that? Would my reading experience be any different? The questions are not unlike those a person might ask who wishes to change a very strong habit. In a word, it wouldn't be easy. Marking and then recording the memorable passages in the books I read has become central to my reading experience. I usually stop reading a book when it doesn't engage me in this fashion. And so to discontinue the practice of commonplacing would make reading a far less absorbing experience than it has become for me.

I suspect many readers make little marks in the books they read. It seems a natural thing to do. Yet only a few readers that I know keep a record of these passages. A few years ago I learned that the practice began in antiquity and that it achieved considerable prominence during the Renaissance. Yet I was completely unaware of the tradition at the time I started my own collection. The fact that I, along with other readers, keep a commonplace book without knowing about this centuries old practice suggests it reflects a rather fundamental feature of the reading experience.

Frankly, I am not at all sure why I began the practice in the first place. The passages must have stood out for one reason or another and I may have wanted to make a record of them in order to reread them sometime in the future. I think I also had dreams of doing some writing. I know I admired a great many writers and often wondered how they were able to write so well. In my naïve way, I must have imagined that if I studied their works carefully and copied portions of them often enough, I might one day be able to write like they did.

In thinking back to the origins of my commonplace book, I realize now I must have found something in the literature I was reading that was not only different but was also somehow more truthful, more discerning about what truly mattered in my life than what I was reading in psychology. I don't recall collecting passages in the academic books and journals I was reading. Yes, I took notes but those were for my lectures and classroom presentations and were never added to my commonplace book or preserved in special notebooks. I may have placed them in a file for the next time I taught the class but not because I found them memorable or otherwise worth saving.

I also know that the reasons that led me to begin my commonplace book have been largely replaced by others now. Transcribing memorable passages from the books I read is how I become truly engaged with the book, engaged with the issues that are important to me at the time of my reading. The issues change

over time, but there is always the great pleasure of making contact with them on the page and then recording those I have marked in order to read them once again as often and whenever I wish

Lately, I have begun to think of my commonplace book as a form of collecting; in my case, collecting ideas as well as clever or provocative expressions that stand apart from ordinary discourse and are, for that reason, worth preserving. In some cases they serve as a standard against which to judge my own attempts to write with some degree of clarity. Collecting ideas also has a number of distinct advantages compared to collecting most other objects—they cost next to nothing, they are easy to find, do not clutter up your closet, and don't require periodic repair or maintenance.

2
Gathering Nectar

We should imitate bees and we should keep in separate compartments whatever we have collected from our diverse reading, for things conserved separately keep better. Then, diligently applying all the resources of our native talent, we should mingle all the various nectars we have tasted, and turn them into a single sweet substance, in such a way that, even if it is apparent where it originated, it appears quite different from what it was in its original state.

Seneca

Make your own Bible. Select and Collect all those words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of trumpet out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, John and Paul.

Emerson *Journals* July 1836

I speak of the collected volume of passages that I have transcribed from the books I've read as a commonplace book. So does the *American Scholar* in its section of extracts from various authors listed on two pages of each issue without commentary or analysis. For example, recent topics have included Loafing, Change, Failure, and Marriage. A similar collection also appears in each monthly issue of *THE SUN,* http://www.thesunmagazine.org, where it is referred to as Sunbeams. For example, the

January 2006 issue presented two columns of passages related to misfortune, despair, and dying from a wide range of authors including Socrates, Henry Miller, Mario Cuomo, and Ann Landers.

Yet a collection of this sort is quite different than the way "commonplace book" is formally defined. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as:

> *A book in which 'commonplaces' or passages important for reference were collected, usually under general heads; hence, a book in which one records passages or matters to be especially remembered or referred to, with or without arrangement.*

My collection was never intended to be a reference book, nor have I organized the material under separate "heads" or topics. Yet that was the way commonplace books were originally conceived. The term "common place" can be traced to the Greeks who referred to the group of philosophical arguments and discussion topics used by statesman and orators as *koinoi topoi* ("general points). The Romans translated the phrase as *communes loci* (general areas of discussion) that scholars and orators also drew upon in composition or speaking. According to Gilbert Highet "some tasteless fellow

Englished the term into "commonplaces."[4] The sense in which the headings were "common" signifies their acceptance as the fundamental beliefs and moral principals of the times. It is ironic that in popular speech the term has come to mean something rather ordinary and unremarkable since there is clearly nothing the least bit ordinary or common in the commonplace books that stretch back to classical antiquity and the Renaissance.

According to Earle Havens Aristotle referred to the collected passages as: "the principal tools of any logical and systematic interrogation of the truth or falsity of an opinion."[5] It is in this sense that commonplace books were originally considered to be organized sources of knowledge and practical wisdom. In Roman times Cicero carried on the tradition by drawing his commonplace material from the works of philosophers, orators, and poets and subsequently applied them in his public speaking and courtroom presentations.[6] In the Middle Ages Scholastic philosophers continued the practice but turned away from secular applications and substituted instead theological and religious

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[4] Gilbert Highet, Uncommon Thoughts in a Common Place, *Horizon Magazine*, Vol. IV, September 1961.

[5] Earle Havens. *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*. University Press of New England. 2001.

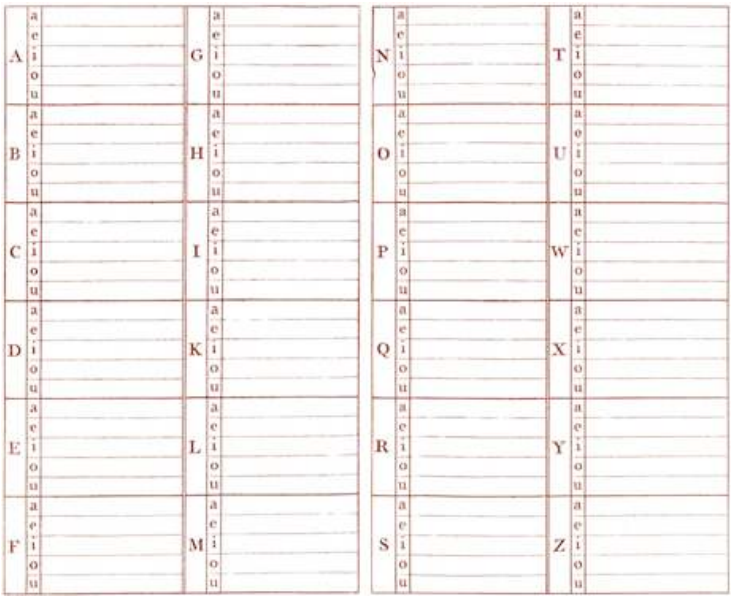
[6] ibid.

words of wisdom as the materials for their commonplace books.
From all accounts the commonplace book tradition reached its peak of popularity during the Renaissance. This was associated with the revival of classical learning and the emergence of the humanistic critique of Scholasticism. Havens writes:

> *Renaissance humanists, teachers, and students were among the first to deliberately invoke the term "commonplace book" to describe collections of quotations organized for the express purpose of demonstrating the best moral wisdom and rhetorical felicity of ancient Greek and Latin authors.*

Erasmus was perhaps the most influential advocate of drawing upon classical learning in this fashion and formulated several different methods for organizing the material. He was also instrumental in promoting commonplace books as an important educational tool, particularly in guiding students to a more disciplined method of reading.

In *A New Method of Making Commonplace Books*, John Locke presented one of the most systematic methods of organizing commonplace entries. At the outset Locke laid out an index keyed to each letter of the alphabet, each of which was divided into five separate boxes corresponding to one of the five vowels as shown below:


A a e i o u
G a e i o u
N a e i o u
T a e i o u
B a e i o u
H a e i o u
O a e i o u
U a e i o u
C a e i o u
I a e i o u
P a e i o u
W a e i o u
D a e i o u
K a e i o u
Q a e i o u
X a e i o u
E a e i o u
L a e i o u
R a e i o u
Y a e i o u
F a e i o u
M a e i o u
S a e i o u
Z a e i o u

He explained his procedure this way:[7]

> *When I meet with any thing that I think fit to put into my Common-Place-Book, I first find a proper head. Suppose for example, that the Head be EPISTOLA, I look into the Index for the first Letter and the following Vowel which in this instance are E.I. If in the space marked E. there is any number, That directs me to the Page designed for words that begin with an E and whose first Vowel, after the initial Letter, is I. I must then write under the*

[7] John Locke*, A New Method of a Common-Place-Book, 1706.*

word EPISTOLA in that Page what I have to remark.

Locke did not begin with a pre-determined set of topics; instead he created them during the course of his readings. They included a broad array of themes, each in turn, followed by the passage he selected, and a comment of his own.

During the Renaissance commonplace books were developed for a wide range of disciplines including literature, law, philosophy, and science. But with the rise of science and the diminishing importance of proof by authority, the value of commonplace book collections declined fairly rapidly. This process was accelerated by the development of comprehensive encyclopedias as sources of reference during the Enlightenment. Havens summarizes evidence that fewer and fewer printed commonplace books appeared during the eighteenth century, *"a period marked by greater public familiarity with other distinct forms of text compilation—verse anthologies, concordances, encyclopedias…"*

Over the course of the next centuries, commonplace books continued to be published although their character changed significantly. Rather than sources of knowledge, they became more personal collections of literary extracts, occasionally followed by brief comments, but largely unorganized and highly idiosyncratic in subject matter. Insofar as the passages in these printed

collections were gathered together under specific topics or themes, they still deviated significantly from the earlier forms of commonplace books that were structured and indexed in a rather systematic fashion.

In a word, the nature of commonplace books evolved from a resource for argument and persuasion in antiquity, to a reference for knowledge and wisdom that flourished during the Renaissance, into its contemporary version of a personal collection of memorable literary quotations without any formal conceptual scheme.

Representative Commonplace Books

Several well-known writers, scholars, and statesmen have kept personal commonplace books; some have been published during their lifetime, while others only after they had died. Two of the most notable of the later group were the commonplace books of John Milton and Thomas Jefferson. In a comprehensive examination of Milton's commonplace book, Ruth Mohl, notes that: "When it was discovered in 1874 it was stained with dampness and was bound in rough brown sheepskin…" and had no lettering to identify its author. Only after its contents were examined, including a letter written to Milton, was it identified as his.[8] Milton's commonplace book was organized

[8] Ruth Mohl. John Milton and His Commonplace Book, 1969. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company.

by thematic indices or headings, such as Morality, Economy, and Literature. Mohl illustrates how Milton's collection provided a storehouse of facts for his political tracts and poetry.

The descendents of Thomas Jefferson withheld publication of his literary commonplace book until 1928.[9] It was one of the two notebooks he kept during the early part of his life; his second notebook dealt with governmental and political issues. His literary commonplace book was based on the work of philosophers and poets and is the earlier of the two. According to Douglas Wilson, who edited a 1988 edition of the work, Jefferson maintained it from the age of about fifteen to thirty and because it the most personal of the two, provides a rare glimpse of Jefferson's formative years and the considerable influence of literature on "the contours of his mind." Many of the entries, written by Jefferson in their original Latin, Greek, or French, seem to have been chosen because of their philosophical and moral content.[10]

In noting some of the similarities between Jefferson's and Milton's commonplace books, Mohl

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[9] Douglas L. Wilson (Ed.) *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Boo*k 1989. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

[10] Wilson indicates that of the 407 entries, 339 are poetry, and 35 of the 45 authors quoted are poets. Homer, Horace, Pope, Milton, Shakespeare and Euripides are among the most frequently quoted

suggests both men selected passages not only for their literary merit but also as "sources of inspiration and practical wisdom."[11] Later she concludes that like Milton's, Jefferson's literary commonplace book is alive with:

> *Themes of courage, self-reliance, freedom, equality, the necessity of wisdom combined with strength, and faith in God…along with those on the brevity of life, death and the fatal beauty of women. In them the personality of Jefferson is strikingly revealed—as if in his own words he was recording his philosophy of life.*

As with the commonplace books of Milton and Jefferson, E. M. Forster's was not discovered until after his death in 1970.[12] He began it in 1925, when he was already 46 years old—about the same age I was when I started my own collection. His initial plan was to organize his selections by topics, but after his first three entries, Commonplaces, Isolation and Resentment, he abandoned this scheme because he "found it too preconceived and dictatorial." Forster's *Commonplace Book* combines literary passages with personal commentary--sometimes

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[11] Mohl ibid.

[12] E. M. Forster *Commonplace Book*, Edited by Philip Gardner, 1985. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

related to the passage, sometimes simply a reflection on another topic--so that in many respects it is both a commonplace book and personal journal. It unfolds cumulatively over time and is said by Gardner to provide a rare view of Forster's intellectual and emotional life. Gardner describes the growing sense of alienation that appears in the passages toward the end of his life and the increasing frequency of literary extracts and personal comments related to change, illness and death.[13]

In 1957 Charles P. Curtis, a professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard, published a delightful and somewhat distinctive commonplace book.[14] Each numbered entry begins with a quotation or aphorism drawn from his literary reading. It is then followed by Curtis' commentary in the manner that Erasmus had originally employed in the several editions of his *Adages*. Like Erasmus, some of Curtis' comments are relatively brief, while others are rather extensive. For example, the third

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[13] One of the last entries Forster writes: *"The belief that I may live after my breath ceases and my body begins to smell never occurs to me—either in the simple form cherished by my ancestors, or in the difficult modern ecclesiastical form…I think of death as a permanent anaesthetic—to be reached amidst pain or fear if my luck is bad, and under perfect hospital conditions if the luck's good. In either case it finishes me off as a memoirist or an observer."*

[14] Charles P. Curtis. *A Commonplace Book*, 1957. New York: Simon and Schuster.

entry poses an amusing question. "In a sense, one can never read the book that the author originally wrote, and one can never read the same book twice." It is followed by Curtis' comment:

> *This is the last sentence of Edmund Wilson's preface to his The Triple Thinkers. ' Books are like rivers. "You cannot bathe in the same river twice, for the new waters are ever flowing in upon you," Heraclitus said.'*
> *Or are we readers the rivers? And book the countryside through which we flow?*

In contrast, the twenty-second entry quotes a short passage from Marlow's *The Jew of Malta*: "But that was in another country; and besides the wench is dead." This extract gives rise to a three page commentary on the mystery of how "words move me without my knowing why or how." The appeal of Curtis' commonplace book is the wonderful interplay he creates between literary passages and his attempt to achieve some understanding of the reasons he was drawn to them. A good many people keep a record of their favorite quotes, proverbs, or literary passages, but far fewer annotate them by reflecting on their meaning and personal relevance as Curtis did.

David Cecil is quite forthright in admitting this is the case for his commonplace book. In 1975 Cecil

published *Library Looking Glass*[15], an anthology of literary passages with extensive annotations that is in many respects a commonplace book at its very best. The passages are drawn from well known literary works, they are provocative, and most are followed with critical comments that are both autobiographical and a pleasure to read. Cecil's volume is also distinctive in that the passages are arranged alphabetically beginning with Art and ending with Wordsworth, leaving blank X, Y, and Z.

Some of the letters have more than one topic, as in "C" with entries on Change of Key, Child in the House, Colour Sense, Comedy, Class System, Classics, Commitment, Complaints, Comparative, Conservation, Content, Contrasts, and Criticism. In addition, more often than not, several passages have been listed for each topic. For example, Cecil has listed nine separate poetry passages for Autumn, while English Landscape has eleven

Cecil was an English aristocrat, literary scholar, and biographer who taught at Oxford for many years. In an amusing introduction to the volume Cecil takes issue with those who recoil from the practice of writing in printing books. He says it is really a compliment to its author saying "It treats him as a living man, with whom one wants, as it were, to converse." In an echo of my own practice, as well

[15] David Cecil. *Library Looking-Glass: A Personal Anthology*, 1975. Constable and Company: London

as those of most contemporary readers who keep a commonplace book, Cecil writes:

> *…when anything in the text has especially struck me, I have noted on the end-paper the number of the page where this has occurred. Sometimes my note simply indicated admiration…The passage referred to was beautiful or comical or well-written in ways that had a peculiar appeal to my own taste, or it stated a view which I found especially illuminating; or it stimulated in me a fruitful train of thought.*

In a *Library Looking Glass*, Cecil has assembled a selection of these passages and has usually added a comment suggesting why they have evoked his interest. Cecil admits that his reasons were largely personal and for this reason his anthology can be thought of as a "sort of self-portrait; myself, as mirrored in the looking-glass of my reading." While his volume may be autobiographical, because there is no temporal order to the alphabetical ordering of the topics, it is difficult to read through from beginning to end, as one would read a personal history. Instead, I prefer to dip into it from to time and skip around from topic to topic in no particular order. Whenever I do this, I find the passages Cecil has selected and his thoughtful commentaries a continuing source of pleasure.

W. H. Auden also organized his commonplace book, *A Certain World*,[16] under thematic headings arranged in alphabetical order. So, for example, the first two are Accidie and Acronyms, while the last two are Word and Writing—apparently he could not come up with anything worthy of citation for X, Y, and Z. Auden does not comment on every entry, preferring instead to keep his own reflections, particularly those that might be viewed as autobiographical, "to a minimum and let others more learned, intelligent, imaginative and witty than I, speak for me."

Nevertheless, his intermittent annotations are far from impersonal. For example, before listing passages from Proust, Ruskin, Goethe and others in the section on Ageing, Auden writes:

> *I was both the youngest child and the youngest grandchild in my family. Being a fairly bright boy, I was generally the youngest in my school class. The result of this was that, until quite recently, I have always assumed that, in any gathering, I was the youngest person present….It is only in the last two or three years that I have begun to notice, to my surprise, that most of the people I see on the streets are younger than I. For the first time, too, though still in*

[16] W. H. Auden. *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book*, 1970. The Viking Press: New York.

good health, I am almost able to believe that I shall die.

What could be more autobiographical than that? And a few pages later, before quoting a poem, *Park Concert,* under the heading Bands, he recalls:

When I was young, brass-band concerts were a regular attraction in the public parks of cities. Am I mistaken in thinking that they have become rarities? All I know is that this poem fills me with nostalgia.

And under his last heading, Writing, after citing several passages concerning this topic, he comments: "Most of what I know about the writing of poetry, or, at least, the kind I am interested in writing, I discovered long before I took an interest in poetry itself." He continues with a two-page recollection of various experiences that influenced his work as a poet.

In a review of *A Certain World*, Benjamin DeMott considers one of the questions that led me to look closely at my own commonplace book, namely what it might reveal about the underlying patterns of a person's life.[17] DeMott suggests one can learn a great deal about the kind of person Auden is from the entries in his commonplace book. He writes

[17] Benjamin DeMott. Speaking of Books: Auden's Commonplace Book. *New York Times*, September 13, 1970.

that aside from what we already know about him,

> *You make out too that he's not young, that he's often melancholy and self accusatory, that he finds life short. And you can assume only a little speculatively, that he lends excitement to the lives of his friends not alone through his writing.....[and is] a rueful, deep, humorous, loving man.*

It would not be a stretch to conclude that Auden's comments in his commonplace book are a good deal more personal than he is willing to admit. So too, I imagine are the entries of the authors of most commonplace books.

3
What Other Readers Say

To collect is to sympathize with art. To make one's own commonplace book is a good way to become a thinker—perhaps even a poet.

Gilbert Highet

A commonplace book is what a provident poet cannot subsist without, for this proverbial reason, that "great wits have short memories:" and whereas, on the other hand, poets, being liars by profession, ought to have good memories; to reconcile these, a book of this sort, is in the nature of a supplemental memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day's reading or conversation. There you enter not only your own original thoughts, (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant) but such of other men as you think fit to make your own, by entering them there.

Thomas Swift

Has the practice of keeping a personal commonplace book disappeared as some commentators claim?[18] Before conducting an informal survey on this subject, I knew of only one

[18] Robert Darnton, "Extraordinary Commonplaces," *The New York Review of Books*, December 21, 2000

other person who kept a written or typed record of passages they selected from the books they read. Surely other serious readers keep a comparable record. However, it is all but impossible to know how many, let alone what form their collection takes. To try to get some evidence on this question I placed a Writer's Query[19] in two consecutive issues of the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. I received thirteen replies—six from England and the United States and one from Canada. Eleven of these individuals completed the short survey shown on the following page about their commonplace book and two of them were kind enough to expand upon their comments during a series of subsequent e-mail exchanges.

All of them expressed a sincere attachment and, in some cases, a deep affection for their commonplace book and the central role it played in their reading experience. One person put it this way: "I see my commonplace book as a kind of treasure chest…[confessing] This is what I believe is true; *this* is what I find to be beautiful." Another said "I copy the best words I have found, the intelligence of my times, of all times…And I do so out of pleasure

[19] Writer seeks accounts of contemporary commonplace books—record or journal of memorable reading passages--including its purpose and role in your reading experience. Brief Commonplace Book survey sent if requested. Send questions and comments in confidence to rkatzev@gmail.com

and gratitude, endlessly working to assimilate what has been given me, paying it the justice of concrete attention…"

On the average these readers had been maintaining their commonplace books for thirty- five years with a range of from five to sixty-five years. This variation seems largely a function of their age, with the majority, as far as I could tell, into their fifties and sixties. Several confirmed my hunch that they had not heard of the term "commonplace book" or been aware of the practice when they began their own. In a delightful confession, one academic described a visit by W. H. Auden to his campus. After introducing Auden to the audience that came to hear his lecture, he went on to say that he "took him to the airport where we drank many martinis. He started to talk about his commonplace book, and I realized that is what I was doing too. As you probably know, his is published and mine will not be. His should be published. Mine should not be."

One individual reported he has been keeping his commonplace book for "as long as I can remember." Another said she had been doing so on and off since she was a child. All but one kept their extracts in hand written notebooks or bound volumes and two reported they kept several of their quotations on index cards taped above their writing desk or tucked inside their desk blotter. One individual reported he has been keeping his commonplace book for "as long as I can remember."

Commonplace Survey

This survey is designed to learn about your commonplace book, what form it takes, and the role it plays in your reading experiences. Your answers will be of value to me as I try to gauge the nature and extent of commonplacing among contemporary readers. Your response will be kept strictly confidential. Please write me if you have any questions at rkatzev@gmail.com

1. For how many years have you kept a commonplace book?

2. In what form do you keep it—written notebook, typed pages, computer document?

3. Approximately what size is the page and how many pages have you collected to date?

4. What are your reasons for keeping a commonplace book?

5. What types of materials do you draw upon in selecting passages for your commonplace book? Check all that apply:

Fiction (novels & short stories	Quotations
Non-fiction (essays & memoir)	Poems
Periodicals	Newspapers
Others (please specify)	

6. How often do you review previous entries?

7. Do you annotate the selections added to your commonplace book? If so, can please describe your practice?

8. Have you organized or analyzed the contents of your commonplace book in any way? If so, please explain.

9. Do you have an electronic version of your commonplace book?

Yes No

10. As part of my research, I will be performing a statistical analysis of a small number of commonplace books. Would you be willing to have yours included in this analysis with assurance of complete confidentially? If so, would you be able to transmit it by e-mail?

11. Please add any further comments about the role of your commonplace book in your reading experience.

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey. I am very grateful for the information you have provided.

Another said she had been doing so on and off since she was a child. All but one kept their extracts in hand written notebooks or bound volumes and two reported they kept several of their quotations on index cards taped above their writing desk or tucked inside their desk blotter.

One individual reported he has been keeping his commonplace book for "as long as I can remember." Another said she had been doing so on and off since she was a child. All but one kept their extracts in hand written notebooks or bound volumes and two reported they kept several of their quotations on index cards taped above their writing desk or tucked inside their desk blotter.

While the majority of individuals reported they had accumulated anywhere from two hundred to three hundred pages in their commonplace book, one reported, to my astonishment, that he had "accumulated 23 volumes, 4,550 pages, which at an average of 230 words per page, comes out to 1,096,500 words." And that is only from the *books* he has read! It takes no account of the passages he has copied from magazines, periodicals, essays, etc. that constitute almost another half of his commonplace activities. The combined total of *both* collections is actually 36 volumes, 7,170 pages and 1,685,500 words! This surely has to be some kind of a world record, probably qualifying for entry in the Guinness Book of World Records. I learned that he had transcribed 80 pages from De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and 140 pages from

Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. He also claimed he generally reads about five books each month. I can also assure you that I was not the least bit surprised when he reported that he is 13 years behind in transcribing passages in his commonplace volumes and that he is currently copying passages from the books he read in 1993. What an astonishing account!

The majority of respondents said they review their entries occasionally, a few as often as three or four times a year. The individual who appeared to review them most often said she does so every few weeks "to look up words that chime in my memory, to refresh my recollection of the material, or simply to browse and savor and rediscover anew their beauties and their teachings."[20] "At odd moments," she continued, "I open the books or folders at random, or spread the pages out, close my eyes and lay the palm of my hand on the page and then lift it to look and see what is there for me at that moment."

Most readers said they entered the passages they selected one after the other, over time, without arranging them in any systematic fashion. However, three said they organized some of their selections by themes or "heads" following the

[20] Audrey Borenstein, author of *One Journal's Life: A Meditation on Journal-Keeping* (Impassio Press, Seattle, WA: 2002) and other works of short fiction, poetry, and criticism.

procedure of the very first commonplace authors. One person reported he kept notes from books on the psychological nature of a footpath that subsequently proved useful to an architect who was designing sidewalks for a new community. He also confessed that for years he collected the last words of dying people.

Two others said they kept some of their passages in notebooks or files explicitly devoted to a single topic. For example, one individual maintained separate notebooks on a variety of topics including "offbeat" quotations on such subjects as peace, feminism, etc. Another said she kept a notebook on Judaica, although she has only entered one quotation in it--one, however, that she has cherished. Its author is Hannah Senesh; "I feel I could not possibly live without writing, even if only for myself, in my diary…A thought that is not put on paper is as if it had never been born. I can only truly grasp a thought when I've expressed it in writing."

The practice of annotating the passages was rare with the majority saying they never did. Three indicated they did so occasionally by adding short comments to a passage in their commonplace book at various periods after they had made the original entry and three others said they occasionally make a short note on the page of the book they are reading. Similarly, none of the individuals reported they have organized the passages in any fashion, although a few said they would like to one day.

One person rebelled at the thought of analyzing her commonplace book. She wrote: "Organization and analysis would contravene the unique value of my commonplace books for me: it would blind me to…invisible lines of connection between ideas and things that appear to dwell in mutually exclusive realms."[21] Yet another reader wrote in defense of the practice: "Why do I do this? Is there some thread running through it all? Is there some thread running through my life?"

More than anything I wanted to know why individuals went to the effort of copying passages from the books they read. What motivated them to engage in this practice and how did they intend to use the collection they assembled? Three themes emerged in the responses I received to this question. Foremost among almost everyone's answer was the desire to *preserve* passages that stood out from the text by virtue of their truth, cleverness, or quality of the writing. As one reader put it, her commonplace book was a way of "snagging fleeting movements and preventing them from vanishing utterly, even a way of preserving a snapshot of one's own identity."

Their rationale was uniformly based on the limitations of recall, that a reader can barely remember a fraction of what they read. Keeping a commonplace book is a method for overcoming these limits and ensuring that the memorable

[21] ibid.

passages they have taken the time to record will be recoverable at some later date to be reviewed and examined anew. One reader reported: "It adds an element of permanence to my reading experience which too often seems ephemeral given the volume of reading I do and the limitations of memory." In citing this important function of commonplace books, these readers were echoing the rationale long ago voiced by Francis Bacon:

> *There can hardly be anything more useful…than a sound help for the memory; that is a good and learned Digest of Common Places…I hold diligence and labour in the entry of commonplaces to be a matter of great use and support in studying…*

A few individuals pointed out how this transforms their reading experience into a more critical, reflective process than it might otherwise be. Readers who keep a commonplace book may be more engaged with the text than those who don't. Rather than skimming lightly over the text, they often read more slowly, stopping from time to time to mark a passage, and to think about its significance for a moment or two. And by keeping a commonplace book they can repeat the same process when they review the passages they have transcribed. One individual referred to the experience as one of "self-involvement" whereby reading isn't simply living "in the moment" but rather living in the "re-examined moment."

Several individuals described their commonplace book as a reference to be used at a later date for a paper, book review, or letter they were planning to write. Some also spoke of their early ambition to become a writer and their hope that copying memorable sections from the books of authors they admired might aid them in learning the tools of the craft. Another wrote of the pleasure derived from sharing her passages with others: "They are all the more precious when I am inspired to impart them to others, to give them pleasure or solace, or to broaden their horizons of understanding when they ask this of me." And several expressed the belief that copying passages would in some mysterious way work its way into the mind so that it would heighten their appreciation of the world and expand their overall literary and personal sensibility. As one reader put it:

> *I've had to trust that all reading goes into the unconscious where it builds a database, so to speak, that gives me intuitive purchase on assessing and understanding the world. Or that serves as a deeply rich palette from which I draw my own creative works, or apply my critical sense.*

Because of its eloquence and insight and because it conveys so well the importance of the recording process itself, I would like to cite portions of one

person's answer to the question why they keep a commonplace book.[22]

> *I like the ritual of finding quotes that mean something to me (quotes that I find beautiful, truthful, challenging, etc.). I like typing them or writing them down (the actual physical act of doing this), and I like re-reading them once I've collected them. I like the deliberate search for quotes, as well as the surprise of stumbling upon them unexpectedly as I'm reading. It's like finding buried treasure and then rescuing it and finding a safe place for it. I rescue the words from the page of many (sometimes too many) words; otherwise, they would be lost. I find these gems and then collect them for safekeeping; my quote books have become treasure trunks.*
>
> *When I write down a thought or expression—when I make it my own—it becomes more alive and valuable. To read a passage I love that I do not write down is like discarding or ignoring something of value…something that could be of future importance as a companion during hard times. Words are companions, lifeboats.*

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[22] Olivia Dresher, writer, publisher of Impassio Press www.impassio.com and director of the Life Writing Connection www.lifewriting.org.

When I write something down, I make it mine by entering the thought or expression more fully. And, by writing it down, I make it "permanent" rather than fleeting. To write down a line or paragraph is a way to naturally pause and drink in the words. To isolate words as a quote (to remove them from the crowd of words) is a way of honoring them. I can't imagine reading a book without stopping to mark or quote passages at least a few times per reading. Quoting slows down my reading and connects me to the writer, whereas just reading (without pausing to quote) is the feeling of rushing and not stopping to touch the words in a more intimate way. And a quote is a world complete in itself….

Notes, fragments, quotes: these have become a way of life for me, the way I approach life and the way I express. I imagine that not having a notebook to write in would be like a musician not having an instrument to play music on. I approach words as a way of being, or one key way of being. Words, music, films, art, nature—these are the pieces of my life.

Handwriting vs. Typing

In thinking further about the various answers individuals made on the Survey, I also came to realize how critical the act of recording is to commonplacing. Reading the text is one thing.

Recalling it is another. But in between these two activities is the process of transcribing. In copying the passages by pen or by typing, a reader is doing more than preserving them for future reference.

What is copying? First it is attending once again to the text. Perhaps it is also thinking about it further; it occupies your mind once again. David Michael Levin has compared transcribing to the hand copying of religious texts by medieval monks, an activity that required "the most intense meditative concentration, poise and steadiness of hand."[23] Later he spoke of it as a "way of carving words (and their meaning) into flesh, into body."

In a subsequent exchange about her survey responses, Olivia Dresher went further to suggest that transcribing the quotes by hand is superior to typing them on a typewriter which in turn is superior to typing them on a computer keyboard. She claimed: "…handwritten quotes linger more in my consciousness because I actually wrote [sometimes very slowly] them with my hands into a notebook. And they feel more permanent (even if that's an illusion), more connected to me, less fleeting."

For Levin and Dresher, writing the passages by hand is an experience that is almost "sacred," a

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[23] David Michael Levin. *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism*. 1985 London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books Ltd.

feature of commonplacing that brings the meaning of the words into consciousness in a far deeper way than when they are typed. The experience becomes a very physical one for them, one that is not unlike incorporating something into your body, as one does in eating food. As Borenstein noted in quoting the Talmud: "A fitting quotation is like bread to the famished."

Further Dresher went on to argue that while typing passages on a typewriter enables you to see them on a piece of paper, it doesn't have the same effects as writing them by hand. And that typing them on a computer keyboard, where they appear on the screen, places the text at an even further distance from the person than either of the two other methods of transcribing.

The distinction these readers make between the several methods of transcribing the passages in their commonplace book is instructive. So too are their claims for their short and long term effects on the transcriber. Does it matter how you record the passages? The hypothesis these readers propose is testable. It would be easy to design an experiment to compare the relative effects of the different methods of transcription. Consider a recall test or some other measure of permanence. Would quotes that had been handwritten be recalled with greater accuracy than those that had been typed on a typewriter or computer keyboard? That is but one of several questions that might be explored in such an experiment.

Earlier I suggested that the desire to preserve memorable reading passages must reflect a fundamental feature of the reading experience leaving open the question of what that might be. The comments of those who responded to the survey question on this topic provide an answer. We keep a commonplace book to compensate for the fragility of our memory. Readers cannot hope to remember but a fraction of what they read.

Memory is elusive, unreliable, plays tricks on us, and has a very limited capacity. A commonplace book is how a reader can surmount these limitations. Preserving passages of literary excellence permits us to revisit them at any time. We can review and reconsider those passages as often as we like; we can reengage ourselves with the text and experience once again its truths. No one likes to forget moments of aesthetic beauty or insight. A camera preserves them as visual images. A commonplace book preserves them as words.

4
The Electronic Future

I have this habit of turning down corners of pages that contain something I like. Sometimes I'll write in a book, but I try to avoid it. It's so messy.

Sara Nelson
So Many Books So Little Time

When Ben Jonson was a small boy, his tutor, William Camden, persuaded him of the virtue of keeping a commonplace book: pages where an ardent reader might copy down passages that especially pleased him, preserving sentences that seemed particularly apt or wise or rightly formed, and which would, because they were written afresh in a new place, and in a context of favor, be better remembered, as if they were being set down at the same time in the memory of the mind.

William H. Gass
A Temple of Texts

From the earliest days of the commonplace book tradition, copying noteworthy passages by hand, usually into one or more notebooks, has been the preferred method of transcription. The introduction of the typewriter and more recently the computer has made inroads on this practice, although only

one of the individuals who responded to the survey said he was now keeping his commonplace book in electronic form. Nevertheless, in recent years a considerable number of "commonplace books" and quotation lists have appeared on the Web. While these electronic analogues of their printed forerunners have probably not led to a revival of the commonplace book tradition, it has surely broadened the audience for what had become a largely private activity.

At the same time it has raised anew in my mind the question of how to define a commonplace book. Is it a patchwork collection of quotations or must the quotes be organized in some fashion to qualify as a commonplace book? In the Preface to her scholarly treatment of Renaissance commonplace books, Ann Moss[24] writes:

> *The subject of my research, the commonplace book, in the form which was normative to it by the end of the sixteenth century, was a collection of quotations (usually Latin quotations) culled from authors held to be authoritative, or at any rate, commendable in their opinions, and regarded as exemplary in terms of linguistic usage and stylistic niceties. The feature which distinguished the commonplace book from any random collection of quotations*

[24] Ann Moss. *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought,* 1996. New York: Oxford University Press.

was the fact that the selected extracts were gathered together under heads.

If the extracts must be organized around "heads" or general topics, most of the commonplace websites would have to be considered so in name only. This is also true for the majority of privately maintained commonplace books that, by and large, are neither organized topically nor annotated to any extent. At the same time I think it is important to appreciate the evolving nature of the practice. In antiquity and the Renaissance commonplace books were viewed as a source of the knowledge and wisdom of the time. Now that we have other vastly more powerful means of organizing knowledge, it is clear that it is no longer necessary to treat them in quite such a restricted fashion.

To be sure, collecting notable thoughts remains a powerful desire for many readers. The legacy of early commonplace books provides a model. Websites that label their collection as a "Commonplace Book" maintain the tradition of this time honored practice. I tend to view a modern commonplace book, then, as a collection of quotations that an *individual*, during the course of their reading experience, has found notable or significant in some respect. This would exclude a large book of quotations that has been selected by a staff of people for commercial purposes, such as *Bartlett's Book of Quotations*.

Thus, it now seems to me that the act of transcribing memorable literary passages, either by hand, typing, or at a computer keyboard is the *sin qua non* of a genuine commonplace book. There are two groups of sites on the Web that can be characterized this way. While the boundaries between the two are not precise, the first are labeled Commonplace Books, while the second are Quotation collections or archives. A representative selection of each group is listed in the following tables.

Several of these sites include a section in which the author gives a brief statement of its background. For example the author of The Sheila Variations, http://www.sheilaomalley.com/archives/cat_commonplace.html, writes:

> *Years ago - in high school - I started keeping a 'commonplace book' - although I had no idea at the time that there was a NAME for it. I just wanted to keep all the quotes I really liked in one place. I called it my quote book. Then much later, I realized that there's a long, long tradition of people keeping these "commonplace books" - especially "those guys" that I love so much in the 18th century. I've shared a ton of those quotes with you all here.*

Representative Commonplace Book Websites

Reading and Writing the Commonplace—A Hypertext Model
http://www.cmu.ca/faculty/pdyck/old/cpbface.htm

J. Jacobs's A Commonplace Book http://3stages.org/quotes

The Constant Reader's Commonplace Book
http://www.constantreader.org/v2/commonplace.html

Identity Theory Commonplace Book
http://www.identitytheory.com/etexts/commonplace.html

Scott McLemee's Commonplace Book
http://www.mclemee.com/id8.html

M. Kuchling's Commonplace Book
http://www.amk.ca/quotations/quotations

Verbatim Commonplace Book http://shanta.edublogs.org

Risa's Commonplace Book
http://epud.net/~bears/common.html

The Advisor's Commonplace Book
http://www.psu.edu/dus/leonard/book

The Sheila Variations
http://www.sheilaomalley.com/archives/cat_commonplace.html

The author of the Quotations Archive, (http://www.aphids.com/quotes/index.shtml, writes:

> *I started this collection of quotations in mid-1993 when I started a job administering a unix machine in a University computer lab. I was looking for a way to motivate people to read the login message (where we often try to communicate problems or new features to users). I decided a new quotation every weekday might make people pay attention to the messages.*

The Commonplace Book website is authored by a librarian, J. Jacobs, at http://3stages.org/quotes is distinctive in that it has an author and word index, as well as a search tool for specific topics and "random quotes." To locate the passages that Jacobs has entered into his Commonplace Book, it is first necessary to type the name of a topic, word, or author in the box on the search page. An author search for Shakespeare resulted in three selections, one for Borges yielded eleven, and a topic search for "Literature" yielded over a dozen passages, some of considerable length. For example, the search for Hemingway produced the following passages that seem most timely at the time of this writing:

> *No one man nor group of men incapable of fighting or exempt from fighting should in any way be given the power, no matter how*

gradually it is given them, to put this country or any country into war.

The first panacea for a mismanaged nation is inflation of the currency; the second is war. Both bring a temporary prosperity; both bring a permanent ruin. But both are the refuge of political and economic opportunists.

Ernest Hemingway
from *"Notes on the Next War" in American Points of View*. 1936

Although the indexing feature of this site readily facilitates a secondary ordering of specific topics, none of the collector's quotations were annotated. Instead they were selected because they were found to be "particularly beautiful or insightful or funny or just plain memorable." The author also notes that they were recorded "for myself so that I can get back to them easily since, for me, 'memorable' does not always translate into I have memorized it," another advantage to his indexing tools.

Two of the electronic commonplace books shown in Table 3 are designed as collective sites, a Wiki in Internet parlance, where anyone can contribute to the list of passages. The Literary Work Commonplace Book on one of the Wikiquote pages, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/List_of_literary_works consists of an unedited collection of quotations drawn from a list of book titles arranged alphabetically. For example, A click on the link for *The American Scene*

by Henry James displays 17 passages including their page and chapter number, while the link for Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* cites 19 passages with their chapter number. The Wikiquote section of literary works includes similar selections for hundreds of well-known books.

The Commonplace Book for Advisors, http://www.psu.edu/dus/leonard/book is a useful collection of quotations that educators might find instructive in guiding and supporting their students. It has been created by the voluntary submissions of unknown advisors from unknown places. Most importantly, it is organized around a set of fourteen topics including careers, decision making, overcoming adversity, success, and friendship.

The remaining websites listed in preceeding table consist of a cumulative set of quotations and sometimes drawings and photographs from literary or artistic sources on various topics that bear no relationship with one another other than they follow one another in chronological order.

The Quotation Websites shown in next table consist of a wide-ranging selection of maxims, proverbs, aphorisms, as well as short, pity statements on a host of topics. All of them are also organized by "heads" or subjects. For example the Quote Garden, http://www.quotegarden.com, lists hundreds of subject links each taking the reader to a new Web page with a series of quotations on that topic. The first, Abortion, lists fifteen different

quotes, while the last, Yoga, lists twenty-four, followed by an additional set of links to Hatha, Pranayama Yoga, Yoga Postures, and Kriya Yoga.

Representative Quotation Websites

Quote Garden http://www.quotegarden.com

Quotations Archive
http://www.aphids.com/quotes/index.shtml

Quotations http://www.theotherpages.org/quote.html

The Quotations Page http://www.quotationspage.com

Dr. Gabriel Robbins Quotes
http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/quotes.html

Quote Geek http://www.quotegeek.com

Library Quotations
http://www.ifla.org/I/humour/subj.htm

Wisdom Quotes http://www.wisdomquotes.com

Some of the sites also focus on more specific issues or individuals. The site maintained by Dr. Gabriel Robbins, a computer science professor, http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/quotes.html, is devoted to remarks of "famous people." While not

organized in any systematic fashion, they are uniformly short, sometimes sly and sometimes humorous remarks that often give one pause. For instance:

> *"Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever."*
> Napoleon Bonaparte

> *"Victory goes to the player who makes the next-to-last mistake."*
> Chessmaster Savielly Tartakower

> *"His ignorance is encyclopedic"*
> Abba Eban

> *"Give me chastity and continence, but not yet."*
> Saint Augustine

> *"A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."*
> Sir Winston Churchill

Finally, the author of the Wisdom Quotes, http://www.wisdomquotes.com introduces the site with a statement that is thoroughly consistent with the commonplace book tradition:

> *Welcome to the Wisdom Quotes site! I've put some of my favorite quotes here, and I try to update with new quotations often. I try to be selective in picking quotes, including only those quotes that I find*

challenging or inspiring or interesting -- in other words, reflecting my own tastes and philosophy.

She has also organized her site around almost 300 separate subject links ranging from Action to Writing and invites readers to subscribe to a Wisdom Quotes e-mail list, promising to send subscribers one of her selections from time to time.

At the outset of this project I assumed that collecting quotes in a commonplace book was an uncommon and fairly private activity. Early on I discovered that only a few commonplace books have been published, largely the works of reasonably well-known authors and none have been widely read. But I had no idea that so many had entered the public domain in the form of electronic websites. There are currently countless quotation sites on the web and a somewhat lesser number that refer to themselves as commonplace books.

In a few exchanges with the authors of these sites, I inquired why they had gone to the effort of posting their selections on the web, rather than keeping them in a private document. One individual responded: "Why not? Publishing things to the Web costs me nothing, so my general policy is to publish any data or documents that I spend time assembling." Another said her website was "a way for friends and visitors to share quotes that they love. I liked the idea of the exchange of authors among reading friends. In a private journal we

wouldn't really be sharing them! As a librarian, my inclination is to share information and ideas."

The lure of the Internet is undeniable. It makes creating a web site, and now a blog, almost as easy as writing a letter or sending an e-mail. In addition, the software, especially for blogs, greatly facilitates the organization of the material in any conceptual or topical arrangement the author wishes. But does its public visibility also increase its readership?

In response to my question about the number of hits or visits their websites get during an average week, one author said about 50-75 hits a week, another said 150 each week, while the author of the most widely visited said his gets about 762 during an average week. On a yearly basis, this ranges from about 2,600 to 39,624, an enormous degree of variability that surely depends on the subject matter of the website, as well as its placement in Internet search engines. Regardless, it is clear that readership on the Web is far greater than what would be expected for a printed volume of the same material. Of course, these figures tell us nothing about how much is read or what a viewer derives from the experience.

5
A Closer Look

Then I was seized with an idea: I would copy out my favourite passages from Ursule Mirouet, word for word….It was the first time in my life that I had felt any desire to copy sentences from a book. I ransacked the room for paper, but all I could find was a few sheets of notepaper intended for letters to our parents….I decided I would write directly onto the inside of my sheepskin coat.

Dai Sijie *Balzac & the Little Chinese Seamstress*

In your luckiest moments of reading, it seems to me, what you find is something to keep quiet about. You find something to hoard. You come upon one of those inexplicable places in a book that touches you so deeply you don't even have the words to say why. And you should not have to. These places belong to you. Others can just go find their own.

Suzanne Freeman *American Scholar Winter 2005.*

My original goal in beginning this project was to look more closely at the entries in my commonplace book in order to determine what they might reveal about the central concerns of my life. It was planned in the manner of any self-analysis. The passages were never selected with the expectation that I or anyone else would one day embark on this task. As a result they convey a relatively

"unbiased" view of the beliefs and feelings that seemed significant to me at the time they were chosen.[25] I thought that by looking at them closely, I might obtain a deeper understanding of myself and the issues that I have been preoccupied with over the course of my reading life.

I realize that this presentation may be of little interest to anyone but myself or that the data that I present have any degree of generality. While it may have the appearance of social science research, it is, in fact, a case study in which I have applied a simple method of measurement in an informal study of my own Commonplace Book. Perhaps this presentation will suggest an approach that other individuals who keep a commonplace book might find useful. It is within this framework that I invite readers to view the results of my own analysis.

At the outset I thought it would be interesting to make note of the type of material that I drew upon in creating my commonplace book. The following table compares the number of Fiction and Non-Fiction works that I read over the years that I have been collecting passages. Of the total (N = 242)

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[25] In the language of social researchers they constituted a non-reactive measure, one taken when individuals are not aware they are being studied. Under these conditions, it is assumed that they behave the way they truly feel since they are not trying to please the experimenter, confirm his hypothesis, or behave in a normative fashion.

Fiction dominates the selections with approximately two-thirds (N= 145) drawn from this genre, with the majority represented by contemporary rather than classical novels (N = 102). The remaining selections were drawn from Non-Fiction sources (N = 97) with almost two-thirds of these from literary periodicals (N = 61).

Analysis of Reading Material

Non-Fiction	
Periodical*	61
Non-Fiction Book	36
Fiction	
Short Story	24
Verse	16
Fiction Book	102
Drama	2
Total Fiction	**145**
Total Non-Fiction	**97**
Total	**242**

Note: "Periodical" refers to any non-fiction essay, interview, interview, reflection, memoir, or profile.

Rather than wade through every one of the almost three hundred pages of my commonplace book, I decided to simplify the task somewhat by classifying a representative sample of passages. I

began with the first block of thirty-five pages. Then I skipped the following thirty pages, then classified those on the next thirty-five pages, skipped the next thirty, and so on until the end. This yielded five separate blocks of thirty five pages in which I attempted to classify the selections I copied over the past twenty years.

It was not always easy to decide how to classify a passage. This was especially true for the Briefs, but sometimes also for the longer passages, and the Quotes. Some were rather enigmatic and I could not reconstruct why I had made note of them in the first place, as in: *Whole lot of heavy thinking going on out there*. Others were brief phrases or collections of colorful words without any general meaning that I could detect, such as *Manny's car wash blues…* Still others were simply unclassifiable because they were vague or difficult to interpret: *It's like a swamp--there are these mangrove trees growing out of it that are quite amazing*.

I often copy a passage because it is clever or humorous but on review, I could not find any conceptual basis to classify them in this study, such as this passage from an essay by Anthony Lane in the *New Yorker*:

> *Is there some law that prevents Tom Hanks from winning the Oscar for the Best Actor forever? The answer is yes. There is such a law. It is the law of the three-year limit,*

otherwise known as the Iron Law of Stardom ….There is no penalty for breaking this law, for the simple reason that it is unbreakable….This is the true a priori, the reality that explains all other realities.

Similarly a number of passages were written so beautifully that they almost commanded a mark in the margin but did not readily lend themselves to classification.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulder, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year…[26]

But by and large most of the passages, especially the longer ones, conveyed a clear and coherent idea that fell into one of the themes that emerged as I went along from page to page.

To get a sense of my scheme, I will briefly define each of the twelve most frequently occurring categories and present an example, along with its

[26] Ernest Hemingway *A Farewell to Arms.*

source. These categories were selected because they met an arbitrary criterion of at least thirty citations out of the 1,115 that I recorded. Each of the illustrative examples has been taken from what was, at the time I undertook the analysis in June of 2005, the last set of passages.

Literature: Citations that treat poetry, fiction, and non-fiction as well as descriptions of the reading experience, specific authors, and the relationship between literature and life.

> *A novel like poetry, can be more or less insightful, more or less profound. It can certainly be more or less moving. It can even be moral or immoral. But, being fiction, it cannot be true or false in the way that an empirical proposition is true or false*.
>
> Eliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Romance: Expressions of love, romantic feelings, and devotion to another person, including a spouse, lover or muse.

> *In the ten years since the car crash took her from him, he had cherished her more than while she was alive. Julius sometimes heaved with despair when he thought of how his lush contentment with Miriam, the true idyllic soaring moments of life, had come and gone without his fully grasping them….He knew also*

that no other woman would ever really matter to him.

Irving Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*

Learning*:* The pleasure and importance of scholarly life and one devoted to research, critical reflection, and analysis.

...just don't imagine life as a complete learned man to be too delightful…It is a tiring, troublesome life full of work; only the delight in doing it gives it its charm. One doesn't get rich with it…

Irving Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*

Change: Statements that describe the factors that are most likely to lead to a change in a person's beliefs and behaviors and the results of various influence techniques.

The people who can make a bold move at a given moment are those who are not constrained economically, culturally or socially. That's why those who grew up in the elite and have the power to impact things have a responsibility to change the face of society.

Ronit Chacham, *Breaking Ranks*

Writing*:* Characterizations of the writing life, its difficulties and importance, including references to particular writing routines and how one learns to write more effectively.

> *It [Graham Greene's The Heart of the Matter] made a strong impression: that one could write with such apparent simplicity of the daily complications and pain of a usual existence, a baffled sensibility.*
>
> Shirley Hazzard
> *Paris Review* #173, Interview

Age*:* The effects of growing older, how others perceive and treat the aged, and how one confronts the increasing problems of old age.

> *She's probably no older than me. In fact, she's my future—the wart, the walker, the wheelchair. As she came closer, he heard her mumbling*.
>
> Irving Yalom, *The Schopenhauer Cure*

Self: How we come to know ourselves, the effect we have on others, and the nature of personal identity, as well as differences between the private and public self.

> *She moved in a manner that suggested she was completely comfortable in her skin*.
>
> Elliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Relationships: a description of the way in which two or more people are linked to one another or an expression about how one feels about the nature of relationships with other people.

> *In our friendship we were able to share our private thoughts and ideas, to test them upon one another, in a way that would have been impossible had we been linked more closely by ties which, paradoxically enough, separate more profoundly than they join, though human illusion forbids us to believe this.*
>
> Lawrence Durrell, *Justine*

Marriage*:* Descriptions of the marital experience, including its joys and limitations, and the course of a marital relationship over time.

> *What a feat of social engineering to shoehorn an entire citizenry (minus the occasional straggler) into such uniform household arrangements, all because everyone knows that true love demands it and that any reluctance to participate signals an insufficiency of love.*
>
> Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic*

Alienation*:* Expressions of isolation, despair, depression and general sense of melancholy, including death and dying.

> *I was just not cut out for the business of living at a time like this, a time when wondering, caring, dreaming…they were just not selling, they were uncool, unhip, not sexy, past their expiration ate…Some other time maybe*.
>
> Elliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Understanding: Statements about explanation in general, the search for truth, and how to most effectively arrive at some degree of knowledge or insight about a person or event.

> *….statistical probabilities aren't the same as truths.*
>
> Ian McEwan, *Saturday*

Solitude*:* The emotional and intellectual experience of being alone, its effects and value, as well as particular examples of a solitary life and why individuals seek it.

> *…the less I have to do with people, the happier I am. When I tried living in life, I was drawn into agitation. To stay out of life, to want nothing and to expect nothing, to keep myself engage din*

elevated contemplative pursuits—that is
the path, my only path, to peace.

Elliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

After I had completed classifying the passages, I indexed each block of thirty-five pages by category and the page number in the commonplace book where it appeared. This provided a tally of the frequency of each category for that block and then, after combining the data for each block, an overall picture of my record keeping-activity.

The following figure displays the sixty different categories that emerged in this analysis in terms of the frequency of their occurrence.[27] Some of the categories were rarely noted.

[27] Indicates the approximate frequency of each category, as shown in the boxes on the left edge for each category shown in the center section of the pyramid with those at the apex the most frequent and those at the base the least.

Frequency	Topic
81-90	Literature
71-80	Romance
61-70	
51-60	Learning
41-50	Age, Change, Marriage, Relationships, Self, Writing
31-40	Alienation, Understanding
21-30	Emotions, Communication, Independence, Life, Solitude
11-20	Absurdities, Achievement, Action, Beauty, Character, Children, Cinema, Creativity, Failure, Judaism, Justice, Limitations, Science, Sex
1-10	Ambiguity, America, Avoidance, Bookstore, Chance, City, Community, Control, Egocentricity, Extravagance, Fitness, Free Speech, Future, Happiness, Hope, Illusions, Italy, Loneliness, Longing, Loyalty, Memory, Philosophy, Praise, Religion, Time, Reality, Teaching, Suffering, Self-fulfilling Prophecy

For example, I recorded only one expression of Hope, and three of Ambiguity, Happiness, Philosophy and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. I noted the concept Loyalty nine times, although it appeared in only one document.[28] Additional

[28] The End of Loyalty by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The New Yorker*, March 9, 1998.

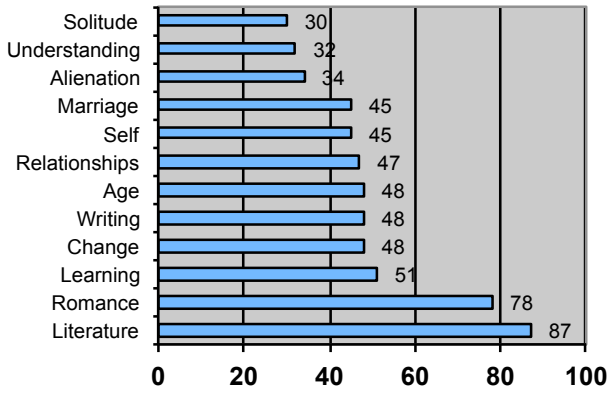
categories with at least 15 citations included Action (as distinguished from belief), Beauty, Character, Children, Communication, Emotions, Failure, Morality, and Life (ordinary daily activities and/or struggles).

Taken together the most frequently cited categories represented slightly more than 50% of all the recorded classifications in this analysis. This leaves open the question of whether this was the result of a certain uniformity in my classifying procedure or the nature of the reading material itself which was no doubt chosen, in part, because it dealt with those topics.

In general there was considerable consistency in the highest-ranking categories for each block of recorded pages. Both Literature and Romance were among the most frequent in each of the five blocks, while Change, Learning and Age appeared in all but one. Two others, Marriage and Self, were in the most frequent list in all but two of the five blocks.

I had anticipated that the themes might vary both in their content and frequency over time so that those I was most likely to choose in the beginning would not be the same twenty years later. But this was not the case, as the category frequencies remained relatively constant throughout this period. And on reflection this doesn't surprise me after all. I am still the same bookish student and incurable romantic that I have always been, even long before I began transcribing passages from books that I read.

In the next figure, I summarized the frequency of the most-cited categories in my analysis.[29] It shows, for example that Solitude was noted 30 times, while each of the remaining categories appeared increasingly more often with Literature reaching a value of 87, almost three times more frequent than Solitude. Each of these twelve categories appeared considerably more often than the majority of the thirty others.



[29] Displays the total frequency of each of the twelve most frequency cited categories.

6
Patterns Among the Passages

For some time since her operation, and without publication its goal, she had been jotting down without order or pattern, anecdotes gleaned from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, noting down those matters or events which moved her. One day these notes and fragments of thought might form a coherent mosaic and reveal to her her own spiritual autobiography as well as biography of her time.

Frederic Tuten *The Green House*

I had a friend attempt to categorize my books once and she said she had a much deeper appreciation for me as a person when she was done.

William Boyd *Brazzaville Beach*

Independently of my own reading proclivities, the commonplace book that I have kept for many years stands alone as a collection of noteworthy ideas, some thoughtful, some provocative, some a little odd, or clever or novel in some way. The significance of the passages that I have copied does not depend on the fact that I selected them. Rather they are the words of writers of serious literature, both fiction and non-fiction that might give anyone

pause for thought. I secretly harbor the wish that my collection might one day be read by readers who share an interest in this sort of material or a student who is investigating contemporary commonplace books.[30]

In one sense my commonplace book has become something of a substitute for a personal journal, a document that long ago I abandoned. For instance, not a day goes by now that I don't think of the experience of growing old and what it is doing to me. And were I in the habit of keeping a journal I would no doubt write far too much about it. Instead, every once in a while I read something about aging that strikes me as especially relevant to my life and so it becomes a passage in my commonplace book, subsequently to be classified under the category of Aging. The same is true for almost all of the categories that appear most frequently in my collection

It is also true that my commonplace book is an account of the increasing importance of literature in my life. Why did I even bother to begin this record and now why do I continue? It is no more than appreciating the thoughts, ideas, and questions that I encounter on the pages of the literature I read. I want to preserve them, revisit them, and reconsider

[30] In his *New York Times* article on commonplace books, Cole notes that: "There is no extensive literature on the commonplace book. I have a friend who [reports that] she could find nothing about commonplace books from her colleagues nor from any of the usual lit histories."

them now and again. The experience is not unlike one of viewing any attractive object. I want to take another look or look a little longer. So I mark the passage and eventually add it to my commonplace book so that I can reread it again and think further about it as often as I like.

To be sure, the passages were selected and thereby valued because of my idiosyncratic personality and background. I wanted to save them, gather them in, squirrel them away. Others feel that way about antiques or fine cars or wine or works of art. I feel that way about ideas. I collect them like others collect rare books. Indeed, the ideas are often rare and for that reason take on additional value. The process has become as much a part of my life as eating and sleeping. No doubt other readers of the same materials would squirrel away a different set of passages. And some of them may be attracted to the passages that I have marked for reasons that have little to do with mine. Perhaps a comparative study of the passages marked by readers of the same book might shed light on this very interesting process.

As I have gone through the passages, I have begun to get a handle on why I was drawn to them in the first place. While some are simply amusing or witty expressions or written so well I simply had to make note of them, the majority convey an important truth, a truth that I have found in literature or a proposed truth that calls for inquiry. Like other readers, I am drawn to literature for many reasons

but among the foremost are for the truths that I find there. I never know when they will be found or what writers and in which of their books, I will chance upon them. Their discovery is unpredictable, unexpected, surprising. The experience is one of the most powerful effects of reading literature. On review, I've concluded that the majority of these truths are for the most part propositions that fall into one of four categories, each of which is defined below, followed by an example.

Belief Confirmation: A passage that reinforces a belief or value that I hold, often one that is not widely held, or one that becomes clearer when seen on the page.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* contains a great many passages of this kind. I marked forty-five separate passages in this intellectually rich novel about a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a British neurosurgeon. Throughout this tale Perowne muses about his discipline, his family, the routine chores that occupy his day, and the troublesome times in which he lives during the early years of the 21st century. In turn, I was led to reflect on those same topics as I paused to place my marks in the margin and then to ponder his musings and the extent to which I agreed with them or not. As a result, although it was not a very lengthy novel, it took me forever to read—a pleasure devoutly treasured by this reader.

Throughout, McEwan speculates about the origins of human behavior and difficulties of identifying them with any precision. Since I have been concerned with those very same issues throughout my professional life, I marked a goodly number where McEwan writes about this issue.

> *It's a commonplace of parenting and modern genetics that parents have little or no influence on the characters of their children. You never know who you are going to get. Opportunities, health, prospects, accent, table manners—these might lie within your power to shape. But what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you is which sperm finds which egg, how the cards in the two packs are chosen, then how they are shuffled, halved and spliced at the moment of recombination. Cheerful or neurotic, kind or greedy, curious or dull, expansive or shy and anywhere in between; it can be quite an affront to parental self-regard, just how much of the work has already been done.*
>
> *Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter?*
>
> *But can anyone really know the sign, the tell of an honest man? There's been some good*

work on this very question. Perowne has read Paul Ekman on the subject. In the smile of a self-conscious liar certain muscle groups in the face are not activated. They only come to life as the expression of genuine feeling. The smile of a deceiver is flawed, insufficient.

***Personal Confirmation**:* A passage that reveals something about myself (or one that I had not recognized before), as well as a correspondence between some aspect of my life and a character in a story, most likely one that I identify with in some respect.

For example, in this analysis I recorded twelve separate descriptions of what I call the two-selves experience. I classified them in the group labeled *Self* and taken together they constituted a little over a quarter (27%) of the forty-five *Self*-related passages. My favorite is drawn from a famous Chekhov short story:

> *He had two lives; one obvious, which every one could see and know, if they were sufficiently interested, a life full of conventional truth and conventional fraud, exactly like the lives of his friends and acquaintances; and another, which moved underground. And by a strange conspiracy of circumstances, everything that was to him important, interesting, vital, everything than enabled him to be*

sincere and denied self-deception and was the very core of his being, must dwell hidden away from others, and everything that made him false, a mere shape in which he hid himself in order to conceal the truth, as for instance his work in the bank, arguments at the club, his favorite gibe about women, going to parties with his wife---all this was open.

Anton Chekhov
The Lady with the Toy Dog

Others have also described the experience well:

Always while one part of him spoke, another part stood on one side and wondered, "Is this who I am speaking? Can I really exist like this?

Graham Greene, *The Man Within*

Everyone he knew carried with them the aura of another life which was half-secret and half-open, to be known about but not mentioned.....He remembered the shock when he first came to know Paris, the culture of easy duplicity, the sense he got of these men and women, watched over by the novelists, casually withholding what mattered to them most.

Colm Toibin, *The Master*

These passages were also marked become they correspond to an enduring duality in

my life, between my work as a social scientist and as a newly arrived student of literature. Trying to embrace these often-contradictory forces has been a continuing challenge, one that I do not shun, but consider worth exploring. I ask myself: Are these two cultures really incompatible? Cannot one hold simultaneously to the different forms of truth, to the general truths of science and the specific truths of literature?

In writing to me about this topic Audrey Borenstein quotes the following passage from her book *Redeeming the Sin: Social Science and Literature*:

> *The social scientist, too, needs experience, observation, and imagination; and the best of social science, the works that will endure, are those in which all three are interwoven. Yet, while the risk for the social scientist is that he may miss seeing the detail—the trees, the risk of the writer is that he may miss seeing the forest. It would seem that the social scientist and the writer work from different directions toward the same achievement, the discovery of the universal. Ultimately, however, the distinction between artistic and scientific endeavor is arbitrary and spurious…The crystal and the molecule, the spinning earth, the leaf moving in the wind are rightful subjects for both poet and*

naturalist: artist and scientist are not two beings, but one.

I have also come to believe that it isn't necessary to choose between these two cultures, that they go hand in hand, much like so many other so-called dualities that are said to characterize contemporary life, say for example between solitude and socializing, between marriage and autonomy, between the public and the private self. Clearly the issue has entered my commonplace book is a very salient fashion.

Hypothesis/Question*:* The passages in this group pose a question or put forward a hypothesis that seems original or usual in some respect, one that warrants inquiry or confirms a finding that I have read about before.

I often make note of such passages because they seem on occasion to be both surprising and illuminating. We don't normally think of literature as a source of hypotheses. Indeed, I know of no social scientist that carries out empirical research on fictional conjectures or draws upon literary insights in any systematic fashion. The various social science disciplines might be enriched if they did. I have taken a few easily testable hypotheses drawn randomly from some of the works of fiction that I've recently read that illustrate this third class of passages from my commonplace book:

Let's say there is only one thing we know about men: that they feel a tension between monogamy and promiscuity. Let's further say that the balance of that tension is different in different men, and that possibly the balance is inherited, and it changes as the men age, sometimes from monogamy toward promiscuity and sometimes from promiscuity toward monogamy.

Jane Smiley, *Why Marriage?*

As civilization advances, poetry declines.

Debra Weinstein
Apprentice to the Flower Poet

There is nothing worse than having been truly happy once in your life. From that moment on, everything makes you sad, even the most insignificant things.

Maxence Fermine, *The Black Violin*

Envy and cruelty inevitably accompany fame, however small that fame may be.

Siri Hustvedt, *What I Loved*

...the last thing we ever learn about ourselves is our effect.

William Boyd, *Brazzaville Beach*

Their inability to dance well is a sign of their inability to adapt themselves to the needs of their partners.

Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

In each instance, an intriguing proposition is proposed, one that that lends itself to empirical inquiry. Several of these notions are non-obvious, some are provocative, while others may seem patently false. Still they are sufficiently in doubt in my mind, as well as sufficiently interesting, to warrant study. To be sure they appear in the books I read quite randomly, almost totally out of the blue it would seem. And because they originate in literature rather than science, they do not enter the research mainstream. The only place they make an appearance are in the books I read and then in my commonplace book, whey they reside until perhaps one day they will be investigated empirically.

Noteworthy: There are, of course, other types of passages that have captured my attention or moved me deeply, but either by virtue of their mystery or distinctiveness do no fall into one of three other groups. Nevertheless, they are among the most important encounters that I've had as a reader.

That winter, when it was all over, I would walk or ride a bus past her building. Sometimes I'd think how lucky I'd been to have spent a year with her there and how gladly I would give everything I now had to

be back with the same woman, staring out those windows whenever she went sulking into the other room, imagining and envying those strolling outside, never once suspecting that one day soon I might be a stroller, too, looking in envying the man I'd been there once, knowing all along, though that if I had to do it over again, I'd still end where I was, yearning for those days when I was living with a woman I had never loved and would never love but in whose home I had…invented a woman who, like me was neither here nor there.

Andre Aciman
Pensione Eolo in False Papers

Summing Up

The truths conveyed by these passages may also be uniquely true for me. That is the wonderful thing about literature: it makes no claims of universality, it is not true or false in the way an empirical proposition is. Rather we read ourselves *into* literature without concern, as we are in science, for whether or not the passage is true for others, and if so, for how many and to what degree. Instead, the truth of any given passage is immediately true to the reader because it corresponds to his or her experience or provides a language for it in a way that had not been available before. "Yes," we say, "that is true for me. This is my story. That's exactly the way I felt. I had not realized its truth until I saw it on the page."

Phyllis Rose expresses a similar view in her recent book on Marcel Proust.[31]

> *...but what I looked forward to most in reading Proust were revelations about myself.....Proust understood that every reader, in reading, reads himself. Far from minding this, he saw it as the writer's task to facilitate it. Thus the writer's word is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book he would perhaps never have perceived in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is proof of its veracity. [Italics mine.]*

Here Rose suggests that the power of literature lies in confirming those truths about our self that we rarely encounter in our daily experience. In a certain respect, then, reading is not unlike the practice of science. In doing science we seek to test our ideas and when they are confirmed, we experience a considerable source of pleasure. Similarly, it is no less a pleasure when in reading we see our self reflected on the page. In both cases there is a delight in the correspondence between a belief about nature or the self, a confirmation that sustains us in our endeavor to make sense of the world in which we live.

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[31] Phyllis Rose, 2000. *The Year of Reading Proust*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press.

Literary truths are not organized as a body of knowledge as they often are in a scientific discipline. They are usually hard to pin down, to remember, and to apply when you might want to, although some are memorable than others. Yet readers differ widely in what they regard as a literary truth. Additionally, it is often claimed that the truths one finds in literature are unlikely to be found elsewhere.

> *Its [literature] cultural importance derives…from its success in telling us things about ourselves that we hear from no other quarter.*
>
> Salman Rushdie

> *He liked novels because they dealt with the incommensurable in life, with the things that couldn't be expressed in any other way.*
>
> Richard Ford

> *We look to fiction for images of reality…that more factual, explanatory accounts cannot quite supply.*
>
> John Updike

There may be little disagreement about this once it is recognized that literary and "factual" accounts have entirely different goals. In a recent interview Daniel Gilbert, an experimental social psychologist, comments that "most of what science has to tell us about human behavior already has been divined by

writers with great insight."[32] In response to a later question Gilbert admits that there's nothing about "human behavior or the experience of the mind that you cannot find in literature. But on the other hand you can also find the opposite in literature. Everything that can be said about the human condition has been said by some writer." He notes that after reading his most recent book, *Stumbling on Happiness* where he liberally quotes Shakespeare, a literature professor said, "Given that Shakespeare saw all this stuff, had these insights, why do we need science?" Gilbert replies "Well I could also find ten places where he said exactly the opposite. If you say everything, some of it winds up being right.

The purpose of science then is that it "helps us confirm which writers were right and which were wrong, but it rarely tells us something that a writer of Shakespeare's caliber didn't come up with first." But even science, at least the science of human behavior, is stuck with considerable empirical uncertainty. Facts and theories come and go with further research; what is held to be true today will in due course shown to be false or incomplete or require revision tomorrow. As Gilbert later admits, he always begins his freshman course, Introduction to Psychology, by telling the students "that half of

[32] Daniel Gilbert Powell's Bookstore Interview: www.powells.com/interviews/danielgilbert.html

what I teach them will turn out to be wrong; the problem is I don't know which half."

This is precisely what he said about Shakespeare. Indeed, in the psychological sciences the level of inconsistency and disagreement between accounts is scarcely distinguishable from literary accounts. A literary truth is always right, right for its fictional depiction, and right for a reader who finds it expresses something true for them. It may not be true for another reader, let alone many others. But a writer has no designs on formulating general truths, as is the case for science.

7
The Commonplace Book Tradition

...my diaries, multitude of notebooks and memoranda, box upon box of correspondence and some fragments of memoir. I sift, I file, I collage. I'm trying to set them in some form of order, trying to discern some underlying pattern or theme amidst all that insignificance and muddle. It's a good job for an old man with time on his hands.

William Boyd *The New Confessions*

A commonplace book is what a provident poet cannot subsist without, for this proverbial reason, that "great wits have short memories:" and whereas, on the other hand, poets, being liars by profession, ought to have good memories; to reconcile these, a book of this sort, is in the nature of a supplemental memory, or a record of what occurs remarkable in every day's reading or conversation. There you enter not only your own original thoughts, (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant) but such of other men as you think fit to make your own, by entering them there.

Jonathan Swift
Letter of Advice to a Young Poet

At the end of this inquiry I return to the question of whether the practice of keeping a commonplace

book has changed me in any respect. I know it has enhanced my reading experience, as I am sure it has for other readers who keep a similar collection. Reading tends to be a fairly passive process. We move rapidly from sentence to sentence, rarely stopping to mull over any single one. Marking those that seem notable for one reason or another slows reading down. It transforms the reading experience from a page turning exercise into an occasion think further about the material, while a timely annotation also gives the reader a chance to reflect further on the marked passages and their personal significance. Rarely do we stop to think twice about a passage, or make note of it so that we can react to it sometime later. In my view, this is the real advantage of collecting notable passages. It deepens the reading experience, turns it into an engagement with issues.

I have also been wondering how this practice has influenced the beliefs and attitudes I hold. And have I come to a greater understanding of my self as a result of the many long years I have been collecting notable passages from works of literature? I know that I often found a correspondence between my reading and personal experience. But did transcribing the passages that described this relationship change me in anyway? I am sure it has but not in ways that are clearly discernable to me or that I can describe very concretely.

Other than the record keeping itself, I can't think of many activities I engage in now that I would not be doing if I didn't keep a commonplace book. At the same time, I know it has made me into a more alert reader and motivated me to give much more thought to the text than I would if I didn't keep one. Perhaps that has strengthened some of the beliefs and attitudes I hold and led me to think more critically about them. And it has also introduced me to a range of new ideas and to consider their relationship to those I already hold or have come to through other experiences. Absent another life or a group of persons to compare with my own experience, the extent of these effects and the specific role of commonplacing in producing them will have to remain a matter of conjecture at this point.

I recall that my initial rationale in making note of dazzling or provocative passages was to learn how to write better. I suspect it has in a limited way. But now I am more focused on collecting ideas. I am sure that has been intellectually worthwhile, at least it has kept me thinking and, above all, identified issues that command my interest and sometimes generated a good deal of further study.

On balance then, the act of transcribing passages surely leaves its mark. While we may be able to assimilate a passage once again by copying it, the fact of the matter is that most commonplace books contain far more entries than any of us can ever hope to recall. So whatever influence the act of

copying has, it is surely one that is limited to short-term effects on accessibility and availability. The long-term effects are far weaker. We may recall having read something memorable in a particular book or by a certain author. But unless we go to the effort of memorizing it at the time we transcribe it and perhaps return to it from time to time again, we will be hard put to bring forth its content with any confidence.

While I record all these truths in my commonplace book, these choice pieces of wisdom, I am not at all sure they have a great deal of influence on my day to day behaviors. I often find that they do not readily come to mind when they might be useful. I put these passages to paper in the hope that they will narrow the gap between gap between thought and action and that I will be able to make more intelligent decisions. But I confess that rarely happens.

At a party the other night someone used in jest the phrase "the meaning in life." I instantly recalled reading that very morning a passage in Joseph's Epstein's essay *Talking to Oneself* that dealt with the meaning of life.[33] However, while I thought the passage would contribute to our discussion, for the life of me I couldn't recall it. Epstein quotes Edward Shils who when the son of a friend of his committed suicide, leaving a note saying that he

[33] Joseph Epstein *Talking to Oneself*. New Criterion 2001.

found life meaningless, responded: "…of course it is meaningless, but most of us are fortunately too busy to dwell on its meaningless." It was only a few hours before that I had read the essay and had, in fact, copied that very passage into a Word document and then entered it along with a few others from the essay, into my commonplace book.

This example is instructive. Most works of literature are usually read in a fairly casual, relaxed fashion. Indeed, some read so quickly it is hard to imagine they are catching much of anything. But for even the most focused readers, it is fair to say that little is recalled or recorded in any permanent fashion. Other than for those who have a photographic memory or are in the practice of regularly reviewing the passages they have collected, it should not be surprising that so very little of what is read is translated into action.

In a review of Keith Gessen's *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, Joyce Carol Oates describes this dilemma well:[34]

> *The predicament of Gessen's characters, as it is likely to be the preeminent predicament of Gessen's generation, is the disparity between what one has learned of history and the possibilities of making use of that knowledge in one's life…*

[34] Joyce Carol Oates Youth! *The New York Review of Books*, 55, No. 7, May 1, 2008.

A lifetime of studying psychology, as well as a good deal of current research on the many factors that give rise to biases and errors in thinking, has convinced me that all too often we overestimate the influence of the written word on behavior. Information by itself, even when it is read carefully and often reviewed does not appear to have a strong effect on behavior. Instead, it represents only one of the many factors that influence behavior, especially in situations where there are other pressures that make it difficult for individuals translate what they have read into action.

The real value, then, of keeping a commonplace book is to insure that whatever it is that we want to remember will permanently reside, not in our mind, but rather in our notebook or computer document, there to revisit and think about further. And by doing so, perhaps we will gradually assimilate these ideas so that they can more readily guide our behavior when they become relevant. Gilbert Highet put it this way: "We are meant to assimilate them as slowly and steadily as a bone grows in our skeleton."[35] But this surely takes much revisiting and a good deal of additional practice.

On Annotating

With rare exceptions I did not annotate the passages at the time they were added to my commonplace

[35] op. cit.

book. To annotate takes time. To annotate thoughtfully takes even more time. According to some of the survey respondents annotating also interferes with the flow of ideas and is thereby to be resisted. Indeed, in contrast to historical tradition, the practice of annotating entries in commonplace books has all but disappeared today. Yet on some accounts, it is an essential feature of commonplacing. William Cole claims:

> *The key word for the commonplace book is "annotated." It is not just an anthology; the compiler reacts to the passages he has chosen or tells what the passages have led him to think about. A piece of prose, a poem, an aphorism can trigger the mind to consider a parallel, to dredge something from the memory, or perhaps to speculate with further range and depth on the same theme.*[36]

Cole leaves open the question of precisely why annotating is so important, as well as if he is referring to annotating each and every passage that one enters in their commonplace book, a task that would take most practitioners several lifetimes to complete. In fact, his definition of the genre—"an annotated personal anthology"—would exclude most of the printed and electronic versions of commonplace books that we know of today.

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[36] William Cole. Speaking of Commonplace Books. *New York Times* May, 3, 1970.

Notable exceptions include in Auden's *A Certain World,* Curtis' *A Commonplace Book and* Cecil's *Library Looking-Glass*, where in response to a memorable passage, these authors, composed brief notes, observations, poems, and sometimes-lengthy commentaries.

Linking together similar passages in an extended treatment of their common theme or connections seems to me annotating at its best and most systematic. To paraphrase one of the survey respondents: I am forever searching for interconnections, for those invisible lines of connection between ideas and things that appear to dwell in mutually exclusive realms. This does not call for a lengthy essay or discourse on the topic at hand, although nothing prevents a reader from composing one. Nor does it call for doing so at the time the passage is read or even when it is entered in a commonplace book. Olivia Dresher described the model I have in mind in an e-mail she sent to me:

> *So it seems to me that it would be interesting if you were to write an essay in which you moved back and forth from selected quotes which reflect directly on your own experience to explaining how and why they do, talking about your own life and experiences….*

And in a way this commentary is an extended annotation on my commonplace book entries, a

great many of which are cited, in the manner Dresher suggests. It is also an autobiography of the issues that have continued to engage me for a very long now time. Sometimes it takes a fair amount of time for a reaction to a set of passages to develop or for their relationship to come into focus as it did for me in deciding to embark on this analysis.

The Future of Commonplace Books

Will the digital commonplace book replace its written forerunners? There are really two issues implied by this question. The first is the future of electronic transcribing. Will readers come to prefer to record their commonplace selections electronically in a computer document rather than in a hand-written notebook? The second is the degree to which those who keep a commonplace book will wish to make them public. While there will always be readers who prefer to keep their commonplace books in a private hand-written manuscript, it is clear that electronic writing and communication is beginning to reposition commonplacing as a public, communal practice. Perhaps we are entering a transition period where those of us raised to read and write in the traditional fashion will simply fade away, gradually be replaced by those raised to read and write electronically.

Still I wonder. Reading is a largely private activity that often takes place at some distance from a computer. I read in bed, in an armchair, on the terrace, or on a park bench. Countless others do so as well. Who wants to take a computer with them

in those settings? In addition, like so many others, I find it extremely difficult to read lengthy documents, including books on a computer ore-reader where marking passages is virtually impossible. If it is a short article or essay, I usually print the material; if it's a book or periodical, I purchase a copy.

Some claim there won't be any reason buy a book or print a document as increasingly sophisticated methods of electronic note-taking and reading begin to overcome the barriers to reading and note taking on the computer today. Well before the development of e-readers, the following scenario was recently described to me in an e-mail exchange on this topic:

> *If you could have your book or reading material readable on a device smaller and lighter than a book, yet with your text at any size or degree of sharpness you desire in any degree of bright or dark conditions, if in addition to a single book, this device could hold hundreds of books, even access entire libraries, if the text could be edited, annotated, highlighted, extracted, if the device could be powered by the sun when you are outdoors, by one's own body heat when indoors--in short, if the little device could do anything a larger computer could*

do only more portably, why would one not want to use it?[37]

Who can answer a question like this? Fortunately, I will never have to. I find this question somewhat like the one people are asking about libraries today. Who goes to the library anymore to get a book, let alone read one there? In fact, books are becoming increasingly hard to find in many libraries these days as they have been replaced by row after row of computer stations. But not everything can be read on a computer. And those who do serious scholarship will always need to read primary materials. My hunch is that there will always be a reason to go to the library and that there will always be individuals who want to do so. Similarly there will always be readers who find it more congenial and enjoyable to read printed books and to make their notes on paper. There were never very many of us in the first place, but there will always be enough to matter.

Self Analysis

Aside from their basic intellectual or emotional merit, it is also possible to infer from the passages in my commonplace book a good deal about my life and personality. As William Cole noted in his article on commonplace books in the *New York Times*: "One gets a pretty good idea of a man, his likes and prejudices, his quirks and manias, the

[37] Victor Munoz. Personal communication. February 14, 2006.

variousness of his mind from reading a commonplace book."[38]

In this respect a person's commonplace book is much like any self-revelatory technique employed in clinical research or practice. Indeed, I have been led to wonder if the practice of copying passages from literature as I have done might have useful therapeutic implications. Consider the routine: clients are asked to mark passages in the books they are reading that seem significant to them and then discusses the reasons they were selected with the therapist.

The notion may seem fanciful, but I am not alone in suggesting it. Just recently I read an observation on this topic by Edward Santoro, a literature teacher that was posted on the web.[39] Santoro wrote:

> *Many years ago I was thinking seriously about a radical psychology (though I wasn't calling it that) that would include fiction as therapy, quite similar to prescribing Prozac or Ritalin or whatever is the flavor of the day. If somebody is trying to work through a difficult issue, particular works of fiction could be prescribed, discussed, analyzed.*

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[38] op.cit.

[39] http://blog.dennisfox.net/index.php/archives/2004/10/03/literary-therapy

This dialogue and the learning to think critically about a text would put a person into a better position of knowing the self and society and their interrelation. I thought and still do think this would be a successful therapy. The irony is that this is exactly what education is supposed to do. Years ago I was looking for books on just such a topic, and though there were a few, nothing really described what I had in mind.

To my knowledge there have only been a few clinical applications of this approach. What I do know is that at times the experience of reading literature can consol me. At other times it provides the kind of insight that traditional therapy is said to offer. In these two respects, then, reading literary fiction may have some therapeutic effects. Whether it can have the same effects for others in a clinical situation remains an open question at this time.

In rereading some of the passages in my commonplace book, it is obvious the way they reflect the continuing concerns and interests that I have. I also found the experience of preparing lists of these passages a rather remarkable one. I kept saying: "No wonder I marked them." More often than not, they were provocative expressions of considerable insight and significance, at times one gem after another. It was often startled to see them on the page again. From my 2007 collection:

Never, never did she feel in life the sense of recognition, the companionship, the great warm fact of solidarity that she found between the covers of a book.

Love is letting be. Letting the other be as they are.

..the bond between teacher and student lasts a lifetime…the feelings we have for the teachers or students who have meant the most to us, like those we have for long-lost friends, never go away.

I also realized that the reasons I may have made note of them many years ago cannot possibly be the ones that draw me to them now. I was much too young then to appreciate the truths that I find in so many of them today. Perhaps my reaction is a simple failure of memory to be sure of the reasons I was intrigued by them originally. Or it might just as readily be due to the multiple ways a passage can be thought of as memorable. Whatever the reason is, I am often surprised to note a comparable regard for a passage that I may have marked in the margin long ago. I also take delight in sensing this continuity in what I regard as worthy of note throughout the many long years of my reading history.

Further, I found a striking consistency in the content of many of the passages recorded for each theme. For example in the passages I recorded on Change,

the fourth most frequent category, a sizeable number dealt with the extraordinary difficulty of changing another person's behavior especially by means of strong external pressures.

> *...essentially you could not persuade anyone to give up something that gave him intense pleasure*
>
> *Joseph Epstein*

> *He really didn't believe you could bend others to your will.*
>
> Jens Christian Grondahl

> *He (Balanchine) was convinced that you could not really change a dancer. All you could do was develop what she already had.*
>
> Joan Acocella

> *People were always saying something had completely changed them, some experience or book or man, but if you knew how they had been before, nothing much really had changed.*
>
> James Salter

I also noticed how many I have cited to bolster a point I've made in a lecture or essay I've written. Drawing upon the passages in this way is precisely the way they were used by the scholars and statesmen who kept commonplace books during antiquity and the Renaissance. I suspect the same is

also true for present-day writers and teachers who have created commonplace books of their own. Similarly, the commonplace book can become a useful tool in the helping students to develop ideas to write about. Erasmus was among the first to emphasize the considerable value in compiling a commonplace book in the education of young children:

> *I am of this opinion, that young children might muche more to their profecte and benefite bee excercised in the grammar schooles with theme, or arguments to write on…so that the schoolemaister dooe open and declare the rewlis and waies how that which is briefly spoken maye bee dilated and sette out more at large, and how that is fondly spoken…maye bee turned or applied to a serious use and purpose.*

Students often report that one of the greatest hurdles they face in getting started on their writing assignments is in finding ideas to write about. Compiling a collection of topics and themes in their commonplace book might be valuable tool in helping them to overcome this problem and making them better, more involved readers. A notebook in which they collect notable passages from their reading could easily be drawn upon for writing assignments and might also serve as a catalyst in developing ideas of their own. Recording these passages under appropriate headings is the key to making such a collection useful to students. As

Price noted in his discussion of this suggestion: "Without this commonplace book activity, however, very seldom would they take the time to think through ideas and discard insubstantial ones before sitting down to write a complete piece."[40]

Next Steps

This analysis of my commonplace book has been more of an exploration than a systematic research project. In terms of future study, the sample selections that I have classified might be completed by examining the pages I omitted. It might also be instructive if another rater replicated my procedure. However, as discussed earlier, there interpretive problems would arise with such a comparison since the experience of other raters would not be the same as mine and thus the meaning and classification of the passages for them would inevitably differ.

The categories were not rigorously defined nor at this stage of my review did I want to stipulate an objective measure of each one. Surely that will be required for any future analysis that intends to be a serious piece of research. Indeed, there is probably considerable overlap between the categories although I tried to reduce that as much as possible as I went along by combining those that were clearly overlapping.

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[40] Gayle B. Price (May, 1980). A case for a modern commonplace book. *College Composition and Communication,* 31, No 2, 175-182.

In a word, what I have done is admittedly an informal review of my commonplace book that scarcely meets the strictures of systematic analysis employed in social research or literary criticism. Instead my goal was to begin to get a sense of what can be done with this kind of material and the value it can have for other readers.

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